The Early US Role in Indochina, 1945-46

NORTH VIETNAM-USA 1945
HO CHI MINH (L3 STANDING) NORTH VIETNAM, AND GEN. VO NGUYEN GIAP (L5 STANDING) NORTH VIETNAM GIVE A FAREWELL PARTY FOR U.S. ARMY INTELLIGENCE TEAM IN 1945. THEY ARE RENE J. DEFOURNEAUX (L2 STANDING) USA, ALLAN SQUIRES (L2 SITTING) USA, AND PAUL HOAGLAND (R1) USA, THE MEDIC WHO SAVED HO.

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America and Indochina, 1942–1945

First meeting on 9 February 1942, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) were involved only tangentially with Indochina for some time. The JCS became the American half of the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) that consisted of the members of the British Chiefs of Staff Committee as well as the JCS and bore responsibility for the strategic direction of the Anglo-American war effort. Indochina had been important primarily because of its strategic position bordering on China and the splendid harbor at Cam Ranh Bay; in 1942 the Allies included Indochina in the China Theater of Operations. President Roosevelt strongly supported building up Chiang's China as a postwar great power. Chiang was given command of the China Theater, under American strategic direction and with an American Chief of Staff at Chungking. American advisers also served with the Chinese forces. Beginning on 9 August 1942, US aircraft based in China (Tenth Air Force until March 1943, then Fourteenth Air Force) struck Japanese targets in Indochina. In 1943 the Allies also set up a Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) under Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. Mountbatten arrived at a "gentlemen's agreement" with Chiang that SEAC regular forces might operate in Indochina if necessary, and boundaries might be adjusted accordingly. But clearly, the efforts of the Chinese to utilize Vietnamese irregulars in Indochina were in keeping with the assignment of the region to their theater.[22]

By 1943 the French Committee of National Liberation had established its headquarters at Algiers. The committee asserted its commitment to the restoration of French rule over the entire colonial empire. With this went a vague pledge for self-government by the peoples involved; for example, on 7 December 1943 the committee announced that "the French mean to give a new political status by which, within the French community [rights] will be reshaped and established on a wider scope; a status whose institutions will have a more liberal character. . . ."[23] The French began to organize a battalion-sized force for special operations against the Japanese in Indochina which put them at cross purposes with President Roosevelt, whose personal antipathy toward Charles de Gaulle affected all US policy concerning France.

Over time the Joint Chiefs of Staff learned of the complications that might arise over the French colonies. In January 1943, President Roosevelt told the Chiefs that Ambassador Robert Murphy had exceeded his authority in conveying assurances to the French before the North Africa landings.[24] For some time Roosevelt's views on Indochina had been based on his hostility toward the European colonial empires, a view that was not unusual in America. His son Elliot recalled him commenting: "The native Indo-Chinese have been so flagrantly downtrodden that they thought to themselves: Anything must be better, than to live under French colonial rule!"[25] The President said he did not intend to be "wheedled into" helping the imperial powers regain their possessions.[26]

Late in the same year, the Joint Chiefs of Staff again heard from the President on this subject. The occasion was a request from the French Committee of National Liberation for arms and for a seat on the Pacific War Council, the diplomatic body in Washington representing the countries involved in the war against Japan. The arms were to be in addition to those received for the Free French forces in Europe, and the request made explicit the committee's desire to send troops to the Far East.[27]

The Joint Strategic Survey Committee[28] reviewed the French request and concluded that there was no military need for French forces in the Pacific war that would justify the allocation of equipment. Reconquering Indochina had no strategic importance. The Joint Chiefs of Staff accepted the report on 8 November 1943. President Roosevelt went further. The Chiefs' assumption that Indochina would be returned to France at the end of the war was incorrect, and the United States would make no such commitment. The State Department was equally unresponsive to the request concerning a seat on the Pacific War Council. Roosevelt made it clear at his meetings with the Prime Minister of England, Winston S. Churchill, that he favored some form of international trusteeship for Indochina (under the then fashionable idea that colonized peoples were usually not "ready" for self-government). The Joint Chiefs of Staff ignored further French requests. This was the

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A B-24 during a bombing mission over Vietnam

general policy of the government, and the Joint Chiefs avoided making the President's views on Indochina explicit to the French.[29]

Policy concerning irregular or clandestine operations in French Indochina proved a much more complicated matter and would lead to a lengthy controversy over who was to blame for what in the region. American officials in the Far East had difficulty determining what American policy actually was, much less implementing it. With the Fourteenth Air Force, commanded by Major General Claire L. Chennault, USA, at Kunming in Yunnan, attacking the Japanese, the Americans needed targeting information and aid for downed air crewmen. Working with the Chinese, Chennault's staff was able to develop the necessary contacts. At the same time, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was interested in developing intelligence sources and clandestine forces in Indochina, especially among the Montagnards. Late in 1944, Lieutenant General Albert C. Wedemeyer, USA, then commanding in the China Theater, told Chennault that Ambassador Hurley was concerned about the degree of cooperation with the French. Hurley made it clear that his concern stemmed from the President's unwillingness to support imperialist ambitions in Southeast Asia.[30]

In July 1944 the French asked the British to intervene with the Americans to give them a role in the war against Japan. The British Chiefs of Staff advised the Joint Chiefs of Staff that they agreed that there was no reason for active participation of French field forces in the Far East. However, they did favor a French mission at SEAC to coordinate clandestine operations. The Joint Chiefs of Staff responded with ambiguous statements that rejected a French mission at SEAC but supported French participation in planning at that headquarters.[31]

Meanwhile, the Free French established military missions at Calcutta, India, and at Kunming where they developed good working relations with the Fourteenth Air Force. The French groups were to begin to organize resistance to the Axis in the Far East.[32] In August 1944, allied forces entered Paris, and a provisional government was established under de Gaulle. The new government made no secret of its intention to regain all colonial possessions. At the same time, the French administration in Indochina abandoned Vichy and began to establish contact with Paris.

President Roosevelt continued to support an international trusteeship for Indochina and steadfastly refused to commit the United States to French recovery of its empire. But, in declining health, occupied with a variety of problems, and sympathetic to the need to use all forces against the Axis, he made some compromises. In October 1944 he told the British Ambassador, Lord Halifax, that Mountbatten should help the French but not "ask questions" that would prejudice political action. At the conference with Churchill and Stalin at Yalta in February, Roosevelt told the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the United States should support the French fighting the Japanese but not align itself with the French.[33]

Cooperation was further complicated by the sensitivity of Wedemeyer's position in China. He asked the French what they thought of a Chinese push from

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US bombing raids on Japanese targets in Vietnam

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US bombers attack a Japanese frigate in Vietnamese waters

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Yunnan into Indochina and learned that the French were suspicious of any move by the Chinese. The French in Washington used these contacts to garner JCS support for clandestine operations in Indochina. The Joint Staff Planners (JSP) were consulted and concluded that the French were seeking an implicit statement of US policy. Meanwhile, the British were trying to establish their interest in the Indochina area and subvert US policy. Therefore, these French suggestions and any further ones should be referred to the State, War, Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC); SWNCC, in turn, temporized until the issue was overtaken by events in Indochina.[34]

Mountbatten and Wedemeyer were working at cross-purposes; because of their disagreements, communications had been chancy. Then, on 23 January 1945, Fourteenth Air Force fighters mistakenly shot down three British bombers on a clandestine mission over Indochina. The two commanders were unable to iron out their differences, and Wedemeyer complained to Washington that Mountbatten was operating in Indochina without his permission.[35]

In Indochina, the Viet Minh survived attacks by the Japanese and the French. Heavy flooding created famine conditions in which as many as two million persons are thought to have died. Allied bombing aimed at transportation nets cannot have helped conditions. At the same time, the contacts between French agents in SEAC and the French in Indochina were conducted with a remarkable amateurishness that made it clear to the Japanese that the colonial administration could not be trusted. By the beginning months of 1945, observers were freely predicting strong action by the Japanese. On 2 February 1945 the French attaché in Chungking asked Wedemeyer whether the French could expect support if they opposed a Japanese takeover. Wedemeyer received an affirmation of existing policy of noninvolvement from Washington.[36]

Crisis and Policy

On 9 March 1945 Japanese action ended the awkward situation of mutual suspicion and apparent cooperation. They seized power in Indochina and interned those French officials and forces that could not escape. A few thousand French troops under Generals Sabattier and Alessandri managed to get to south China, covered part of the way by close air support from the US Fourteenth Air Force. Meanwhile, the Japanese declared that Vietnam was now independent under the rule of the Emperor Bao Dai, who in turn adhered to the coalition of Japanese puppet states in the Far East. Bao Dai attempted to base a government on such pro-Japanese groups as the Restoration League and the Dai Viet (Greater Viet Nam Nationalist Association).[37]

On 12 March the French embassy in Washington asked for assistance for the French resistance in Indochina; a formal French request to the CCS called for intelligence support, closer coordination, and air operations for bombing and airdrops

of equipment.[38] Wedemeyer, then in Washington, met with Roosevelt and learned that the President still did not want to help the French. Nevertheless, by 19 March he was ready to allow operations "to help French provided such aid does not interfere with planned operations."[39] However, the President continued to enjoin caution about French and British political motives in Indochina. At the time of his death at Warm Springs, Georgia, on 12 April 1945, Roosevelt was negotiating with Churchill about the terms for cooperation between Mountbatten and Wedemeyer over Indochina.[40]

In Paris, the Japanese action in Indochina brought an affirmation of French policy to regain the region. On 24 March the Provisional Government issued a statement outlining a postwar plan for Indochina. The French Empire, reconstituted as the French Union, would include an Indochinese Federation consisting of the five territories. All forms of ethnic discrimination would be abolished. Representative assemblies would be elected, but international affairs would be handled in Paris, and the Governor-General would appoint the executive officials.[41] In prewar Indochina this declaration might have been acceptable to most Vietnamese nationalists, but in 1945 it was not enough.

For the Viet Minh the Japanese coup was an opportunity to move toward a national uprising. The unsettled conditions of a country in famine, under foreign occupation, and a weak government given little power by the occupier and despised as foreign puppets by everyone else created what the leadership termed a "preinsurrectionary" phase. The Viet Minh called for a united front against the Japanese and declared their willingness to cooperate with French resistance groups in Indochina. Giap's military forces began a cautious guerrilla campaign against the Japanese, while a "Liberated Zone" took shape in the Viet Bac. The Viet Minh made a point of declaring that, as the allies of the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom, they were on the winning side. The surrender of Germany in May 1945 could be presented as proof of impending victory. The uprising would come, whether or not Allied forces actually reached Indochina.[42]

The Japanese coup wiped out the Allied intelligence contacts within the French administration; the OSS largely started from scratch. Teams began working with Sabattier and Alessandri, and elements of their forces took part in some clandestine operations in Tonkin. However, the French were at a distinct disadvantage, since the Vietnamese population was unwilling to work with them, and on one occasion even guided a French party into a Viet Minh ambush. One American officer reported: "I don't think the French will ever do a hell of a lot of good in Indochina because Annamite hatred makes it a more dangerous place for them than for us."[43] In fact, Americans came to fear being mistaken for French.

The Army Air Forces Air Ground Aid Service at Kunming had contacted Ho Chi Minh about providing him with equipment to help rescue Allied fliers downed in Indochina. The OSS was also interested in Viet Minh support, and on 16 July 1945 a team under Major Allison K. Thomas parachuted into Tonkin near Thai Nguyen and

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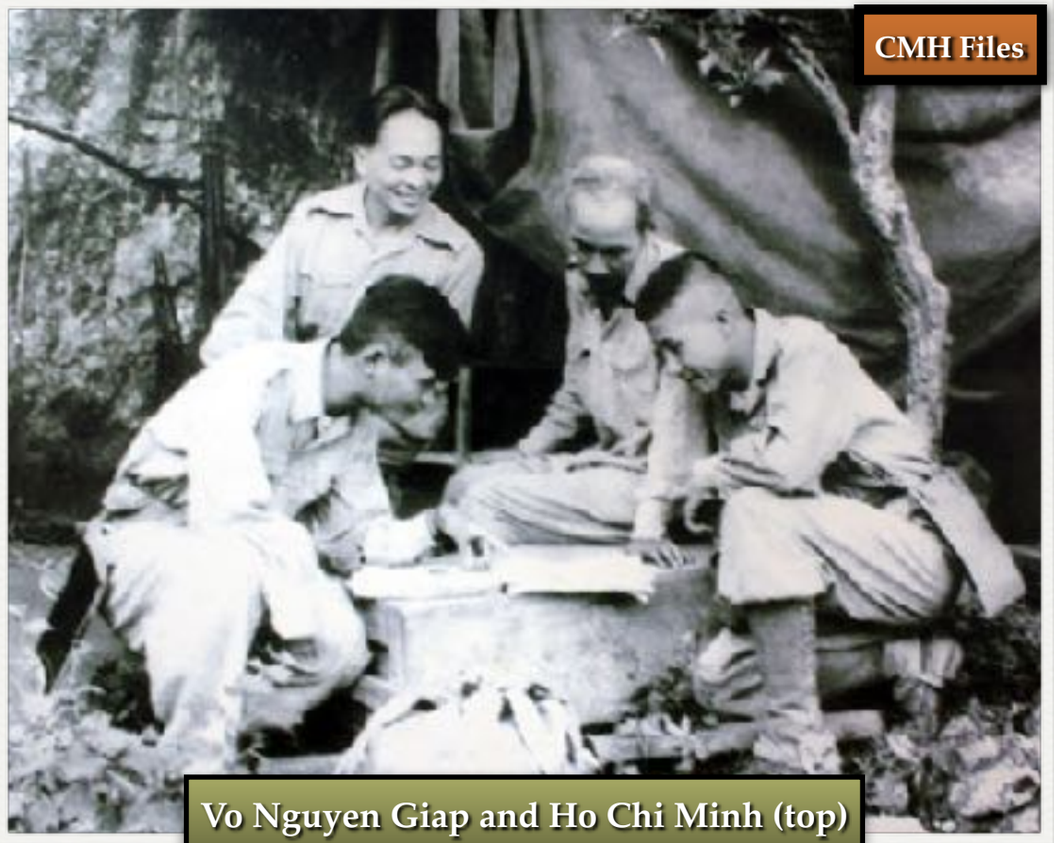
Viet Minh military chief Vo Nguyen Giap (center)



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Vo Nguyen Giap and Ho Chi Minh (top)

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Viet Minh officials welcome OSS agents in Hanoi, August 1945

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were met in person by Ho Chi Minh—whom they came to know as "Mr. C. M. Hoo." Thomas's party worked with the Viet Minh over the coming month and provided some weapons, although the subsequent French assertion that the OSS had "armed" the Viet Minh was an exaggeration.[44]

Ho appears to have told Thomas of the Viet Minh position on a return of the French. The Viet Minh leader had attempted to advise the French mission at Kunming of the Vietnamese demands that a national assembly be established and that the French commit themselves to complete independence for Vietnam within five to ten years. Bound by the declaration of March 24, the French essentially ignored Ho's demands.[45]

Ho Chi Minh anticipated the news on 15 August of Japan's surrender. The atomic attack on Hiroshima on 6 August set off wide speculation that the Japanese were finished. For the Viet Minh this was the signal for the general uprising, and they were on the move. On 14 August a congress at Thai Nguyen formed a coalition People's Liberation Committee. Following a massive rally in front of the National Theater in Hanoi on 19 August, the Viet Minh took control of the city as the Japanese looked on. Local resistance crumbled throughout Tonkin and Annam. On 25 August Bao Dai abdicated at Hue. These were heady days; Vietnamese who lived through the time never forgot it. Even in Cochin, although the Viet Minh had far less control and were forced to play a lesser role than in the north, a United National Front joined in a group called the Committee of the South at Saigon which was headed by a Viet Minh agent, Tran Van Giau.[46]

On 22 August the first Americans arrived in Hanoi, headed by an OSS officer, Major Archimedes L. A. Patti. They were accompanied by Major Jean Sainteny, a French intelligence officer from the mission in Kunming. The French in Hanoi were not in any position to oppose the Viet Minh. The four or five thousand French troops interned in the citadel by the Japanese were still there. Patti was on the platform for the ceremonies at Hanoi on 2 September attending the declaration of independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Ho Chi Minh was the President of the Provisional Government, and he told Patti that the new republic wanted good relations with the United States. The declaration of independence quoted the Americans' own declaration of 1776 as well as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789.[47]

The Viet Minh had seized the moment. Their position on the ground was sustained by rising popular enthusiasm owing to famine, Japanese occupation, and the memory of French oppression as well as the communists' organizing skills. The assistance of the Americans had been useful but not crucial. Only a fraction of their weapons had come from the Americans. Many had been captured from the French or the Japanese, and with the final Japanese surrender in the offing, it appears that stocks of their weapons found their way into the hands of Vietnamese nationalist groups, especially the Viet Minh. Later French allegations that the Americans had "armed" the Viet Minh were essentially false. But the Americans on the

scene were basically uninformed about US policy and were largely unaware that their government no longer posed any objection to French return to Indochina.[48]

President Roosevelt's opposition to the French regaining Indochina had come under heavy opposition, and he had been forced into pragmatic adjustments to allow the French to help fight the Japanese. With his death, US policy became formally neutral in the sense of neither supporting nor opposing the French. On 14 April 1945 SWNCC decided to seek a firm policy statement from President Harry S. Truman. The Joint Chiefs of Staff concurred in a draft statement to the effect that the United States would do nothing for France that it would not do for any other ally, would not oppose restoration of Indochina to France, and would favor, in principle, French participation in the war against Japan. The State Department could not agree, and the statement did not go forward. Over the spring of 1945 proposals for a trusteeship for Indochina faded away. De Gaulle voiced his resistance, and at the United Nations Conference at San Francisco the matter never arose. On 8 May Secretary of State Edward R. Stettinius, Jr., informed French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault that the United States had never officially opposed French sovereignty over Indochina.[49] And on 2 June SWNCC submitted a statement on the Far East to President Truman that included the statement, "the United States recognizes French sovereignty over Indochina."[50]

Americans on the ground in the Far East had little clear idea of what government policy actually was, let alone what changes were being made. At the end of May, Wedemeyer was increasingly frustrated at Mountbatten's actions in running special operations in Indochina without permission. The two commanders were still appealing to their own governments over the matter. Ambassador Hurley supported General Wedemeyer in his concern. But General Marshall in his reply to Wedemeyer's complaints pointed out that US policy now welcomed French participation in the war against Japan. A trusteeship in Indochina was unlikely. There was no objection from a policy standpoint to Mountbatten's operations in the region.[51]

The Truman administration left it to General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, who was to command the invasion of Japan, to decide what assistance the French could provide; nothing was to be done specifically to get troops to Indochina. The French advised that two divisions would be ready for the Far East, the 9th Colonial Infantry Division (DIC) by the end of June and the 1st DIC by the end of July. The Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed that shipping for these divisions would not be ready nor be required for months. When the heads of government met at Potsdam in July, the Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed that the French would eventually be employed against Japan but decided to stall on equipping the divisions. The CCS also agreed that in the event of a Japanese surrender the China Theater should be responsible for occupying Indochina north of the 16th parallel; SEAC would take over south of that line.[52]

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Viet Minh officials claim independence in Hanoi, August 1945

The French Return and the Americans Depart

The surrender of Japan did not bring immediate peace to Asia. But the US Government assumed that its goal now was to get out of the region. In Indochina, America recognized French sovereignty but did not consider itself obliged to help them regain control and did not want to appear to be helping. Sensitivity to Asian and American opinion alone would have justified a policy that seemed to eliminate any need to keep troops or spend money in the region. No sooner had the news of the surrender become known than the French asked for transportation to Indochina for the two divisions previously promised for the war effort. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were happy to refer the matter to the British. While neither the British nor the Americans had aircraft available to move Alessandri's men back from China into Indochina, shipping was soon available for the troops coming from Europe.[53] The French troops, commanded by General Leclerc, began to arrive in the Far East by the end of September 1945.[54]

The Potsdam agreement did not require waiting for the French. Chiang Kai-Shek (with Wedemeyer advising him) and Admiral Mountbatten were responsible for occupying Indochina and disarming and repatriating the Japanese. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department wanted to disassociate the United States from SEAC as quickly as possible; the American advisers accompanying the Chinese forces in northern Indochina were to avoid any political involvement.

The Chinese commander for northern Indochina was Lieutenant General Lu Han, a relative of the Yunnan warlord Lung Yun, and his troops were largely the warlord's men. The Kuomintang thus hoped to weaken the warlord; Lu Han's motive in the occupation was to enrich himself, his family, and his adherents. His agenda apparently was not known by the French and Americans in the region. His adviser was Brigadier General Philip E. Gallagher. Until Lu Han's arrival in Hanoi on 18 September, the small group of Americans with Patti and the OSS group observed the Viet Minh gaining control of the situation. Under the circumstances, cross-purposes hardly begin to describe the welter of goals of the Viet Minh, other Vietnamese nationalists, the French, the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Americans. General Gallagher's mission was doomed to being misunderstood because of the expectations everyone had of the Americans.[55]

The French understood that they needed protection. French civilian residents of Hanoi were subject to frequent attacks by Vietnamese and the prisoners of war remained unarmed in the citadel. Lu Han began by refusing to allow the French flag to fly at the ceremony of surrender by the Japanese. Patti had warned that arming the French would lead to fighting with the Vietnamese; Gallagher secured the release of the Frenchmen in the citadel but refused to arm them. A major fiasco resulted from Chinese efforts to manipulate the currency. When the French-controlled Bank of Indochina tried to rescue the piaster, it incurred the ire of the

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Japanese surrender in Hanoi

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OSS agents train Viet Minh soldiers

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Chinese and the DRV. Gallagher was only partially successful in ending the crisis in November.[55]

The French complained to the US Government about Gallagher. Although the charge that he had met secretly with the Chinese to keep the French out of northern Indochina was proven to be unfounded, his observations in correspondence with General Wedemeyer would not have pleased Paris. "I pointed out [to Ho Chi Minh] frankly that my job was not as a representative of the State Department nor was I interested in the political situation . . . that I was merely working with Lu Han. Confidentially I wish the Annamites could be given their independence, but of course we have no voice in this matter."[57] Wedemeyer needed Gallagher's staff elsewhere, and the War Department was concerned that Gallagher was becoming a liability. On 12 December he was recalled from Indochina, and an official American presence in north Indochina ceased.[58]

The Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted even less to do with the situation in southern Indochina. Advanced elements of an OSS team were among the first Allied personnel parachuted into Cochin, arriving 1 September. The team chief, Major A. Peter Dewey, arrived on 4 September, and the British commander, Major General Douglas Gracey, reached Saigon two days later. An Anglo-French agreement committed SEAC to turning over southern Indochina to the French. In Saigon the Committee of the South was trying to hold its position among the Japanese, Trotskyists, noncommunist nationalists, the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, the Binh Xuyen (a powerful crime syndicate), and the beleaguered local French community. British-Indian troops did not begin arriving in force until 20 September, and Gracey, refusing to rely on the Committee of the South, gave the task of keeping order to the Japanese. The Committee staged a massive demonstration on 17 September to protest. Gracey armed the French prisoners of war, who then went on a rampage. The Committee of the South responded with a general strike, and the Binh Xuyen massacred 150 French civilians. The OSS team, whose missions involved helping any Americans and looking for war criminals, offended General Gracey by contacting the Vietnamese leaders. On 26 September Dewey was killed in an ambush, apparently mistaken for a Frenchman, although at the time the circumstances were a complete mystery.[59]

In October Leclerc and his troops began to reach Cochin. Leclerc outlined his plans to Dewey's successor, who then received orders from Washington to avoid all political contact. Meanwhile, British-Indian and French troops began to take control of southern Indochina. A schedule for turnover to the French was concluded on 9 October, and troops reached Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the next day. By 25 October the French had a full division available, talks with the Committee of the South had failed, and the Viet Minh were driven from Saigon. Although they managed to eliminate the Trotskyists, the united front in the south had broken up. Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, the new French High Commissioner for Indochina, arrived in Saigon on 31 October.[60]

American policy meanwhile was aimed at disassociating the United States as much as possible from Indochina. In spite of State Department hesitation, the Joint Chiefs of Staff insisted on reducing US participation in SEAC to a liaison team. On 15 October 1945 SWNCC agreed to US withdrawal from Mountbatten's command as soon as possible, "in order that the implication of United States participation in Southeast Asia Command policies and activities in the Netherlands East Indies and Indo-China may be eliminated immediately."[61] The reduction to a US liaison team at SEAC took effect 1 November, but no public notice was given of this action until January 1946, which weakened the benefit of a clear separation from Dutch and French efforts to restore their colonial empires.[62]

At the end of January, the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted that the British planned to withdraw from Indochina and leave the French in charge south of the 16th parallel. The Joint Chiefs did not want the British to relinquish authority for disarming and repatriating Japanese troops, a task that was still far from complete, as this would require renegotiating the surrender agreement. This position won SWNCC approval, and on 1 February the Joint Chiefs of Staff asked the British to retain control. The British Chiefs of Staff objected but agreed to a compromise by which Lord Mountbatten would retain a reduced position in Indochina solely for the purpose of repatriating the Japanese, while leaving southern Indochina otherwise under French control. The Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed to this arrangement.[63]

The Chinese Government at Chungking had succeeded in removing Lung Yun and was willing to withdraw Lu Han's troops from Indochina. In Tonkin the Chinese continued to hope that the Dong Minh Hoi could gain control of the country. The Viet Minh, however, continued to hold the upper hand. Ho Chi Minh's success at combating famine and organizing the population bore fruit in the negotiations and in the election of 6 January 1946 that gave the Viet Minh control of the DRV national assembly. A coalition government with the Dong Minh Hoi forced the Chinese to choose between the Viet Minh and the French. D'Argenlieu's visit to Chungking and negotiations between China and France produced a treaty on 28 February. France gave up all its concessions in China under the "unequal treaties." In turn China would give up control of northern Indochina effective 31 March.[64]

The French asked the Combined Chiefs of Staff to approve the transfer agreement. On 3 April the CCS approved the transfer and prescribed that the French should assume overall responsibility for the repatriation of the Japanese in both parts of Indochina. The British Chiefs of Staff announced the transfer of this responsibility in southern Indochina effective 13 May. Meanwhile, the Chinese began their withdrawal from northern Indochina. While some Chinese troops remained in control of parts of the Laotian highlands until September 1946, when they captured the opium harvest, Tonkin was largely free of Chinese troops by the summer.[65]

The French were back in Indochina to deal with the Viet Minh on their own. Each side's expectations of the Americans had been disappointed. Whatever his

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OSS agents train Viet Minh soldiers

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sincerity, Ho had expressed hope for support from the United States. Among the French there were many signs of bitterness over what they perceived as American betrayal. It is true that Roosevelt had been less than forthright about his unwillingness to let the French return to Indochina, and Patti and Gallagher may have been somewhat indiscreet in their dealings with the Viet Minh. But some of the allegations by French participants were without foundation. In particular, it was alleged that the Americans in Hanoi, motivated by an "infantile anticolonialism" (as Sainteny termed it), had incited Viet Minh opposition (as if that had been necessary) to promote US economic interests in the region.[66] In fact, whatever the vagaries of American policy, one of its wellsprings was to avoid any responsibility for developments in Indochina, hardly the way to advance selfish imperialistic schemes. As for obstruction, the lack of shipping, however convenient a rationale for delaying the movement of French troops, had been a perennial issue throughout the Second World War. But accusations of American double-dealing would later surface whenever there was criticism of French policy and action in Indochina.

In any case, France was in a critical situation. The determination of de Gaulle's government to return to their eastern empire was evidently popular with the voters. The French Communist Party was in the government coalition and was reluctant to risk its position by supporting Ho Chi Minh's aspirations for full independence. As 1946 began, the Constituent Assembly was meeting in Paris. De Gaulle resigned from office on 20 January and Felix Gouin succeeded him. During the year the French frequently voted on constitutions and assemblies before a new constitution took effect for the Fourth Republic (and for the French Union) in the fall. Bidault succeeded Gouin in June.[67] Against a backdrop of instability in France, d'Argenlieu labored to extend French control in Indochina.

For his part, Ho Chi Minh struggled to balance the demands of the nationalists who insisted on immediate and total independence and his willingness to accommodate French demands. Stalin was hoping to help the French Communist Party as well as obtain French cooperation with his German policy against the Anglo-American position. Lacking strong support from Moscow, Ho was forced into a conciliatory approach. On 6 March he reached an accord with Sainteny. The French agreed to recognize the DRV within the French Union and gained the right to move troops into Tonkin.[68]

The rest of 1946 saw continued dispute over the implementation of the March 6 Accords. Vietnam cannot be said to have been at peace as incidents continued; it was really a matter of averting full-scale war. Vietnamese nationalists denounced Ho's concessions to the French, and Bao Dai abandoned his support for the DRV and went to Hong Kong. Long and arduous negotiations followed in Indochina and in France. Ho spent most of the summer in France trying to find an accommodation. The French concluded pacts with the Kings of Cambodia and Laos in January and August. D'Argenlieu took steps to undermine an accord and strove to make sure that Cochin did not fall under the DRV. An agreement of 14 September

Ho Chi Minh in Paris, July 1945

Excerpt from "The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War, 1947-1954

between Ho and the Minister for Overseas France, Marius Moutet, sought to avert total collapse.[69]

Tensions escalated, however, and on 20 November an incident involving a French patrol boat in Haiphong harbor led to sporadic fighting in the town. Lieutenant General Jean Valluy in Saigon, with backing from d'Argenlieu, then in Paris, overruled the local commander and ordered forcible action to gain control of Haiphong. A devastating naval bombardment on 23 November helped the French clear the town. This incident seems to have persuaded Ho Chi Minh that further efforts at a peaceful settlement were hopeless. The French reinforced their positions in the north. Ho made a last-minute appeal to the new acting head of the French Government, the socialist Leon Blum, which French authorities seem to have prevented from reaching him. Warned by an agent, the French in Hanoi were on alert on the evening 19 December when the Viet Minh struck. After days of brutal house-to-house fighting, the French cleared the city. Ho and the Viet Minh got away to the countryside. Giap announced a general offensive against the French and fighting spread over Tonkin. Blum declared that France wanted a peace based on the consent of the Vietnamese people, once order was restored.[70] The eight-year war had begun.

Ho Chi Minh arrives in France for talks, July 1945